

Message Text

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PAGE 01 SANTIA 02726 132201Z

ACTION ARA-14

INFO OCT-01 ISO-00 SSO-00 SSC-01 CIAE-00 DODE-00
NSAE-00 NSCE-00 ICAE-00 INRE-00 PM-05 H-01 INR-10
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FM AMEMBASSY SANTIAGO

TO SECSTATE WASHDC NIACT IMMEDIATE 8868

C O N F I D E N T I A L SANTIAGO 2726

3.O. 11652 GDS

TAGS: PGOV, PINT CI

SUBJECT: CHILEAN CABINET RESIGNS -- CIVILIAN NAMED AS INTERIOR
MINISTER

1. IN A SURPRISE MOVE EVENING APRIL 12, PRESIDENT PINOCHET ANNOUNCED THAT ALL CABINET MEMBERS HAD RESIGNED; THAT HE HAD NAMED CIVILIAN SERGIO FERNANDEZ TO BE THE NEW MINISTER OF INTERIOR; THAT GENERAL CESAR BENAVIDES WAS MOVING FROM INTERIOR TO BECOME SECRETARY OF DEFENSE; THAT DEFENSE MINISTER HERMAN BRADY WOULD BECOME AN ADVISOR TO THE PRESIDENT; AND THAT FERNANDEZ, AS THE NEW MINISTER OF INTERIOR, HAD 48 HOURS TO FILL THE OTHER CABINET POSITIONS.

2. COMMENT. PINOCHET CLEARLY INTENDS TO REGAIN THE INITIATIVE THAT EVENTS HAVE BEEN TAKING FROM HIM. THE SPEEDING UP OF THE NEW CONSTITUTION, THE UP-BEAT TREATMENT OF THE MEZVINSKY VISIT, AND THE SWEETNESS AND LIGHT LOCAL PUBLICITY FOR THE SECOND STAGE OF THE CHILE-ARGENTINE TALKS ARE ALL PART OF AN EFFORT TO COUNTER INCREASINGLY PREVALENT RUMORS THAT THE PRESIDENT IS LOSING HIS GRIP ON THE GOVERNMENT. THERE HAD BEEN WISPY RUMORS DURING MARCH THAT A CABINET RESHUFFLE WAS IN THE WORKS. AND AT ONE POINT FERNANDEZ FELT OBLIGED TO DENY STORIES THAT HE WAS RESIGNING HIS JOB AS COMPTROLLER GENERAL. BUT THE TIMING OF THE PINOCHET
CONFIDENTIAL

CONFIDENTIAL

PAGE 02 SANTIA 02726 132201Z

ANNOUNCEMENT TOOK EVERYONE OFF GUARD.

3. GIVING FERNANDEZ THE INTERIOR JOB IS A CLEVER MOVE. EVEN THOUGH FERNANDEZ SAID THIS EVENING THAT THE NEW CABINET WILL NOT NECESSARILY HAVE GREATER CIVILIAN PARTICIPATION, IT IS A GOOD BET THAT IT WILL. IN TERMS OF IMAGE, FERNANDEZ IS A VAST IMPROVEMENT OVER BENAVIDES, A STOLID (MOST WOULD SAY DUMB), INSENSITIVE MAN WHO

LOOKED AND FREQUENTLY BEHAVED LIKE CENTRAL CASTING'S IDEA OF A HEAVY. MOREOVER, PINOCHET WANTS TO GIVE THE IMPRESSION THAT FERNANDEZ HAS BECOME SOMTHING OF A PRIME MINISTER, THAT A CIVILIAN WILL BE SELECTING THE NEW CABINET AND, PRESUMABLY, SHOULDERING SOME OF THE RESPONSIBILITIES OF DAY-TO-DAY RULE.

4. PINOCHET HAS BEEN PROMOTING FERNANDEZ. EVER SINCE THE FORTYISH LABOR LAWYER (AND PARTNER OF MIGUEL SCHWEITZER JR. -- THE GOC'S HUMAN RIGHTS CONSELLOR) TOOKOVER THE LABOR MINISTRY IN 1976, PINOCHET HAS ENTRUSTED HIM WITH DELICATE ASSIGNMENTS. HE WEN TO WASHINGTON AS AN INTERMEDIARY TO DISCUSS THE CORVALAN EXCHANGE. HE TOOK OVER THE CONTRALORIA GENERAL AT THE END OF 1977 TO MAKE SURE THE "CONSULTA" GO THROUGH THAT BODY. ALTHOUGH LITTLE HAS BEEN HEARD OF HIM SINCE TAKING OVER THE COMPTROLLER'S JOB, AS LABOR MINISTER FERNANDEZ GENERALLY TOOK A TOUGH LINE. HE REFUSED TO MEET WITH THE GROUP OF TEN (DEMOCRATIC LABOR LEADERS) AND MADE CLEAR THAT STRIKES WOULD HAVE NO PLACE IN THE NEW CHILE.

5. WHILE MOVING OUT BENAVIDES TO MAKE ROOM FOR FERNANDEZ, PINOCHET WOULD HARDLY JETTISON ONE OF THE SENIOR GENERALS MOST CLEARLY IDENTIFIED WITH HIM. NOTWITHSTANDING BENAVIDES OMINOUS APPEARANCE AND LACK OF INTELLECTIAT RADIANCE, HE HAS BEEN ASSOCIATED WITH THE GROUP URGING PINOCHET TO ACCELERATE THE TRANSITION AND INTRODUCE PALLIATIVES FOR THE SOCIAL COSTS OF THE ECONOMIC PROGRAM. ALSO, DESPITE FERNANDEZ' SWEEPING MANDATE, PINOCHET MAY HAVE WANTED TO MAKE CLEAR THAT HE WAS NAMING THE NEW DEFENSE MINISTER.
CONFIDENTIAL

CONFIDENTIAL

PAGE 03 SANTIA 02726 132201Z

GENERAL BRADY MAY HAVE BEEN VULNERABLE BECAUSE OF POLICE HANDLING OF THE TOWNLEY AFFAIR. IN ADDITION, THERE HAS BEEN SOME SPECULATION IN RECENT WEEKS THAT HE MAY GO AS AMBASSADOR TO LIMA BECAUSE OF HIS RAPPORT WITH MILITARY COUNTERPARTS THERE.

6. OPERATIONS CENTER. PLEASE CALL CHILE DESK OFFICER BOB STEVEN AT HOME AT 0700 APRIL 13 AND ENSURE TIMELY DISTRIBUTION OF THIS MESSAGE TO DEPARTMENT OFFICERS PREPARING MORNING BRIEFINGS.

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